



# TACTICAL

## CONCEPTS

By Sid Heal

### CHARACTERISTICS OF CRISES AND CONFLICTS

Tactical operations come in all sizes, shapes, kinds, styles and varieties. Regardless of whether the operation involves a high risk warrant service, evacuation, barricaded suspect or hostage recovery, its most irreducible description is that it is some sort of a crisis. A crisis is an emotionally stressful event or situation involving an impending, abrupt and decisive change. While we all have a natural tendency to view a crisis as bad, a crisis is more precisely defined as a situation that can turn out bad. Throughout our lives, each of us has experienced many types of crises. They are an inevitable part of life and involve our business, friends, family, or even our health. While crises tend to be relatively short-lived, they almost never get better by themselves. Some type of intervention is necessary. Yet, even with an intervention, the outcome is never entirely certain.

In law enforcement crises manifest themselves in three recurring varieties. The first are those that result from natural disasters such as earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes, or blizzards. Interventions for these types of crises may require evacuations, rescues, searches, or any combination thereof. The second type are those that are “mechanical” in nature because they result from failings of man-made devices. These may take the form of airplane crashes, major traffic accidents, railroad derailments, hazardous materials spills, and so forth. The third type involves those situations in which there are one or more suspects who must be captured or defeated in some manner. Examples include snipers, barricaded suspects, hostage situations, fleeing felons, and the like. This last type is a special type of crisis, called a “conflict.”

A conflict is any situation in which there

is an irreconcilable clash between opposing wills. As used here, a “will” is simply a desire, purpose or determination held by one or more people. Thus, a single will can represent an opposing position from any number of suspects or terrorists.

While a crisis may result from whims of nature, such as fires, floods, earthquakes, hazardous materials spills or major rescues, conflicts involve an adversary who is actively engaged in thwarting the will of the tactical commander. Consequently, conflicts are far more dangerous and complex. Accordingly, it is a logical necessity that the suspect(s) must be defeated to succeed. An implied objective inherent in these situations is to impose the will of the commander on the suspect.

#### FIVE CHARACTERISTICS OF CRISES

All crises share five common characteristics. First, these situations are among the most confusing likely to be encountered by anyone. There is always a lack of reliable information, and what is available is usually incomplete, ambiguous, and sometimes even conflicting. While it is true with all crises, it is especially critical in conflicts. This is because the very nature of conflict makes certainty impossible. The dynamic interplay between the will of the suspect(s) and the will of the commander makes conflicts especially difficult and complex. Uncertainty is always present and pervades these situations because of a lack of knowledge regarding the suspect, terrain, weather, innocent bystanders, and even other law enforcement personnel. This uncertainty requires commanders to make decisions based upon probabilities for which they are invariably

lacking accurate and timely data. This is one of the most pervasive attributes in these situations and is described by a concept called “fog.” Fog is that condition which prohibits a tactical commander from obtaining accurate information in a timely manner. A complete and reliable view of any tactical situation is thus impossible. The military refers to this concept as “the fog of war.” (For more information, see “Fog and Friction,” *The Tactical Edge*, Winter 1995, p. 76.) To a greater or lesser degree, fog is present in all crises, but especially conflicts. Consequently, the information needed to make reliable decisions will never be entirely satisfactory.

Second, because of the countless factors that impinge on tactical situations, a commander must accept some degree of risk. Risk is inherent in every tactical situation. Some risk is personal, such as when the decision-maker is exposed to physical or emotional harm, or when failure can result in career hardships or setbacks. There may also be risk to others, as when efforts to achieve a successful resolution will increase the peril of subordinates. Nearly always, there is organizational risk. Organizational risk may involve a loss of equipment, assets or prestige. Commanders attempt to reduce risk by seeking better, timelier and more accurate information, but since this is never entirely possible, risk is unavoidable.

#### ELEMENT OF CHANCE

Aggravating the lack of information is the uncontrollable element of chance. Chance consists of turns of events that cannot reasonably be foreseen and over which we (or an adversary) have no control. The uncontrollable factors, accompanied by the inherent risk in trying to dominate them

and compounded with the element of chance, creates a condition called "friction." Friction is the force that resists all action. It makes the simple difficult and the difficult seemingly impossible. Friction may be psychological, as when a commander becomes overwhelmed by the amount of risk, or when chance favors the suspect. It may also be self-induced, such as when a commander suffers from indecision, fear of failure, or a lack of a clearly defined goal. It can also be physical, as when the suspect succeeds in some endeavor, or the commander encounters an obstacle. Only a commander who has experienced the disappointment and frustration of trying to read in darkness or rain, or in attempting to control a situation with a broken radio, can truly appreciate the impact that physical obstacles have on emotional feelings and mental attitude. (For more information on how mental attitude impacts crisis decision-making see "OBE Condition," *The Tactical Edge*, Winter 1998, p. 79.) Thus, friction will always have

a psychological as well as a physical impact. Like fog, friction is unavoidable and is present in every tactical encounter

Third, each episode in an operation is the result of a unique and temporary combination of circumstances. Unique, because each circumstance is dependent only upon those factors which are present at the particular time and place, and temporary, because an outcome, of any kind, affects the next set of circumstances. In a conflict, the opponent who can most quickly exploit the circumstances to his benefit gains an advantage. Moreover, a decision and action delayed is often rendered ineffective because the circumstances will have changed. Thus, all tactical operations are time sensitive. Further, when an adversary is involved, they are not only time sensitive, but also time competitive. (For more information on the effects of time see "Maneuvering in Time," *The Tactical Edge*, Fall 2001, pp. 60-61.) Time or opportunity neglected by one adversary is exploited

by the other. The aggregate resolution of these episodes will eventually determine the outcome of the conflict.

## THE HUMAN ELEMENT

Fourth, a human element is always present. In fact, without an impact on humans, it is impossible to experience a crisis. Earthquakes off the California coast, hurricanes in the Caribbean Sea and mid-Atlantic Ocean, and range fires in open fields and distant forests occur with frightening regularity, but it is only when humans are impacted that they become a crisis. Moreover, because interventions are always human activities, human characteristics such as training, experience, maturity, emotion, prejudice and discipline deeply affect individual and collective efforts. Because the most fundamental factor in conflicts is the irreconcilable disagreement between adversaries, these situations are especially susceptible, and will be inflamed and shaped by human emotions and personalities. Consequently, any doctrine or plan that attempts to reduce tactics to ratios of forces, weapons or equipment, or attempts to impose an algorithm on how to resolve them, neglects the impact of the human will on the conduct of the operation and is therefore inherently flawed.

Fifth, in the ever-changing and confusing environment of uncertainty, frustration, ambiguity and risk, tactical situations inevitably gravitate toward disorder. Each encounter in a tactical situation will tend to grow increasingly more complex and disordered over time. Since the situation is continuously changing, a commander is forced to improvise again and again until the final actions frequently have little resemblance to the original scheme.

These five characteristics manifest themselves in countless ways and combinations in every tactical operation. Tactical commanders who recognize that they are intrinsic in each and every crisis are not as likely to be surprised or discouraged when they are experienced. ■

**Editor's note:** Much of this article has been excerpted from Sid Heal's book, "*Sound Doctrine: A Tactical Primer*," available from the NTOA Bookstore.



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